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SUBJECT: SUCCESSFUL START TO ISLAMIC CONFERENCE

REF: (A) BERLIN 2847 (B) BERLIN 2808 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. Summary. Germany's Sept. 27 Islam Conference of government and Muslim representatives has been widely hailed as a successful and historic occasion. Interior Ministry contacts report the event was better than expected, even though there were differing views among the Muslim participants and two organizations have hinted they might not continue in the process. The Conference, envisaged as a two-to-three year process, continues in November with a second full session as well, perhaps, as working group meetings. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Reports from Interior Minister Schaeuble's closed-door Islam Conference on Sept. 27 describe a respectful and orderly, if not always harmonious exchange of views among the 30 participants -- 15 from German officialdom, 10 independent Muslims, and five representatives from the largest Muslim religious organizations. Any lack of harmony arose, reportedly, from differing views within the Muslim half of the conference as much as from differences between the Muslim and official participants. Necla Kelek, a frequent critic of many Islamic practices, reportedly called for a ban on headscarves in public schools, which provoked criticism from other Muslims. Whether Muslim girls should join in co-ed sports classes was another controversial intra-Muslim issue. Between (some) Muslims and the government, the conflict over the participants (Ref A), who were chosen by the Ministry, continued -- both the Central Council of Muslims and the Muslim Council suggested they may drop out of the dialogue process. The press made much of the agreement by Muslim participants, on the grounds of freedom of opinion, that the controversial staging of Mozart's opera "Idomeneo" should not have been canceled.

Reaction

¶3. (U) On the day of the Conference, Schaeuble published a full page article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine, putting as the central task for the participants: "How can we arrive at the point where as many Muslims in Germany as possible feel themselves to be German Muslims, who identify with this country, its language, its culture and its laws, without perceiving these as in contradiction to their religious conception." Despite the bumps, at the end of the session, which ran almost an hour longer than scheduled, Minister Schaeuble pronounced himself pleased, especially with the unreserved agreement by all participants that the German constitution would serve as the basis for the dialogue. Senior Interior Ministry staff told us they Conference had gone off better than they expected. Bekir Alboga, spokesman for Ditib, the Turkish-government affiliated largest Muslim religious organization in Germany, pronounced himself "a happy man, on the one hand because of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and on the other because of the Conference." Even the General Secretary of the somewhat critical Central Council described the day as "historic." A Central Council official told us the Council "might perhaps" issue a

statement, but had not done so by September 29.

¶4. (U) Media reaction was positive and congratulatory, though many outlets seemed to believe that the suggestion that all participants (except the Islam Council) planned to attend a performance of Idomeneo (if revived) was the major outcome of the event. The Frankfurter Allgemeine (FAZ), while hoping that the Conference could begin to end mutual ignorance and suspicion between the general ethnic German and Muslim communities, also predicted a "long and painful path" for Muslims who have bound their religious practice to cultural tradition. The liberal "Frankfurter Rundschau" regretted (but accepted) that it was necessary for the government to deal with Islam "as an organizing political body and structural factor in social life" and that it would be successful when, in this regard, it was no longer needed. The "Sueddeutsche Zeitung" welcomed the dialogue in a brief editorial, but chose to focus, under the headline "Fear of Islam" on the Idomeneo story as an example of dangerous self-censorship.

Next Steps

¶5. (U) The Sept. 27 Conference initiated a planned two-to-three year process of dialogue, structured in three working groups with intermittent plenary sessions. The second meeting of the Conference, perhaps in conjunction with the first working group sessions, is scheduled for November 8 and 9 in Nuremberg, where a secretariat for the Conference will also be established at the federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

TIMKEN JR